

Oscar Stanton De Priest: Fighting ‘Jim Crow’ Inside the United States Congress

Prem Thottumkara
Macomb Junior High School, Macomb
Teacher: Brock Bainter

The path to racial equality in the United States has been marred with struggles, controversies and setbacks. Consider, for example, the Jim Crow Laws. These sets of state and local laws, practiced predominantly in the southern states, required African-Americans to be segregated in all public facilities. Seating in buses and trains was segregated, as were public schools, lunch counters and seating in cafeterias. The Jim Crow era that spanned from 1876 through 1964 was challenged in 1954 through the landmark court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in which the Supreme Court ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional. Yet, this dark era in American history ended only 10 years later, when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It was unthinkable that three decades before the passage of this law, the influence of the Jim Crow Laws was being felt in the halls of the United States Congress. In 1934, Illinois Congressman, Oscar Stanton De Priest, the first African-American Congressman from a northern state, challenged the Jim Crow discrimination that he experienced inside the halls of Congress.

Oscar Stanton De Priest’s life is a profile in determination, hard work, courage, and conviction. De Priest was born to freed slave parents in 1871 in Alabama. When De Priest was seven, his family moved to Kansas. At the age of 17, De Priest ran away from home with two white companions to Chicago where he worked as an apprentice to a home decorator. Through his hard work and resolve, De Priest established a home decorating business when the African-American population was soaring in Chicago.

After realizing that the growing African-American population of Chicago greatly needed representation and voice, De Priest decided to get involved in politics, and subsequently joined Lincoln's Republican Party. De Priest became immersed in local politics and was elected as the Cook County Commissioner in 1904. Later, in 1914, he became Chicago's first African-American alderman. As alderman, De Priest was a spokesperson for the unrepresented blacks in his community.

In 1928, De Priest was thrust into the national political scene when Chicago's incumbent Congressman, John Madden, died during his campaign. De Priest replaced Madden on the ballot and won the election by receiving most of the votes in black precincts. During his victory speech, De Priest promised that he would represent all of the Chicagoans, and also that he would try to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments of the Constitution for every citizen. Newspapers nationwide exulted in De Priest's victory, and the Baltimore *Afro-American* specifically stated that, "We now have a man in Congress."

Even before De Priest was sworn in as a Congressman, he felt the pain of discrimination in the halls of Congress. His presence was not a welcome one for many southern Congressmen who refused to be in the same atrium as him. For instance, Jeff Busby, a six-year Congressman from Mississippi wanted the largest office in Congress which was designated for De Priest. De Priest was forced to relinquish the spacious office for a new but smaller one. The new office was next to the office of George Pritchard, a new Congressman from North Carolina. Hearing of his neighbor's background, Pritchard told his secretary to, "vacate immediately. Lock door and deliver key to superintendent of house office building. Remove my name from doors." These

remarks clearly were not a welcome sign for the new African-American Congressman. Heedless of the unwelcome comments from his fellow Congressmen, De Priest set out to start his work as an Illinois representative. One of De Priest's main contributions was to secure pensions for ex-slaves. De Priest also fought for appropriations to Howard University and the Tuskegee Institute. As a highly acclaimed orator, De Priest never missed a chance to speak against the Jim Crow Laws, and this was most evident in his third term in Congress representing the First District of Illinois.

In January 1934, De Priest's confidential secretary and his son were refused service at the Congressional restaurant because of the color of their skin. De Priest learned that the refusal was an arbitrary decision made by Lindsay C. Warren, the North Carolina representative, and De Priest was quite angered by it. De Priest raised this issue in Congress at his next chance and proposed a House Resolution to investigate Warren's actions. To initiate an investigation, De Priest began a petition drive and made convincing speeches in the chamber. In one speech he stated, "If we allow segregation and the denial of constitutional rights under the dome of the capitol, where in God's name will we get them?" Upon listening to the speech, a Texas Congressman reminded De Priest that he had never been refused service in the House Cafeteria and thus should not make an issue of the incident. De Priest succinctly replied, "I am not asking privileges for Oscar De Priest...but I am asking for those who have no voice in this Congress." De Priest's persistence for having the inquiry came to fruition when Congress established a five-man committee to investigate the House Cafeteria incident. The committee was comprised of 3 Democrats and was headed by the then Speaker of the House, Henry Rainey of Illinois. De Priest picked two Republicans to complete the

committee. The committees wrote reports stating their conclusions in May 1934. The majority sided with Warren and said that the cafeteria practice could continue, with only white guests allowed. The minority concluded that if Warren's ruling was not repealed, "It will set an example where people will say Congress approves of denying 10 percent of our population equal rights and opportunity; why should not the rest of the American people do likewise?"

Ultimately, De Priest lost his Congressional seat in 1934 and was unable to affect the changes in racial attitudes that the black community so desperately wanted. Regardless, De Priest's efforts and dedication to civil rights and his actions against inhumane Jim Crow laws will be remembered in history, as significant contributions towards racial equality. [S. Davis Day, "Herbert Hoover and Racial Politics: The De Priest Incident," *Journal Of Negro History* (Winter 1980); Kenneth Eugene Mann, "Oscar Stanton De Priest: Persuasive Agent for the Black Masses," *Negro History Bulletin* (October 1972); Elliot M. Rudwick, "Oscar De Priest and the Jim Crow Restaurant in the U.S. House of Representatives," *Journal of Negro Education* (Winter 1966); and Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement*.]